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ABSTRACT

A major trend in children's literature is the growing academic recognition of the field--indicated by the large number of new texts that have been published since 1975. Scholarly periodicals in the field have likewise grown since the 1970s. Library science, elementary education and English literature have fostered the development of children's literature. Current trends in the subject and treatment of children's literature include (1) the celebration of traditional America indicated by "A Gathering of Days" and "Ox-Cart Man" receiving the 1980 Newbery and Caldecott awards, and by the conservative mood of the country; (2) a continuing presentation of ethnic materials effectively portrayed in picture book format; (3) fewer strident examples of street language and more emphasis on the stylistic grace of language, which may enhance poetry; and (4) the progressing rapprochement between the mass media and children's books providing more media translations of children's books. (HOD)

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CHILDREN'S BOOKS: CURRENT TRENDS

Southeast National Council of Teachers of English Affiliate Conference
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A major trend of children's literature today is the growing academic recognition of the field. One instance of this recognition is in the large number of new texts which have been published since 1975. To the two major works which have long dominated the field -- May Hill Arbuthnot's Children and Books (later editions revised by Zena Sutherland) and Charlotte Huck's Children's Literature in the Elementary School have been added works by Iris Tiedt (Exploring Books with Children, 1979), Francelia Butler (Sharing Literature with Children, 1977), John Stewig (Children and Literature, 1980), and others. Some books have focused attention on age groups at each end of the spectrum; for instance, Cullinan and Carmichael's Literature and Young Children (1977) and Donelson and Nilsen's Literature for Today's Young Adults (1980). Representative of specialized study is A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature by Rebecca Lukens (1976), who presents the use of literary criticism as appropriate for juvenile books.

Scholarly periodicals in the field have likewise grown during the 1970's. Children's Literature and the related Children's Literature Association Quarterly present scholarship of historical and explicatory nature along the lines of

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other other Modern Language Association-affiliated groups. Phaedrus is bibliographic in emphasis, often with an international inclusiveness. Such an approach is commendable, for an important area in which American children's literature needs expansion is international awareness. (John Donovan, Executive Director of the Children's Book Council, in the December 1979 issue of School Library Journal, concluded "that American children read a body of books that may be more parochial than those read by children anywhere in the developed world.") The Lion and the Unicorn, a journal which has been sponsored in part by the New York State Council on the Arts, publishes critical and interpretative studies; issues are usually theme-centered. Two groups affiliated with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Children's Literature Assembly and the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN), are developing their newsletters into substantial publications. The ALAN Review, in particular, is now a refereed journal which includes a variety of articles as well as handy-format reviews.

This professional activity reflects the three academic disciplines which have fostered development of children's literature: library science, elementary education, and English literature. Since the 1920's, when the field first received widespread formal attention -- for example, the institution of Book Week and the Newbery Medal and the development of juvenile departments by publishers -- schools and libraries have been promoting children's reading for pleasure as well

as information. Recently, universities have been realizing that the area is a fruitful one for research. This is having the happy and long deserved effect of acknowledging that fine children's books are an integral part of the continuum of good literature. As C. S. Lewis said, "No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty . . ." (Essays Presented to Charles Williams, Oxford Univ. Press, 1947, p. 100) One cautionary note, however, has been sounded: by Aidan Chambers, British author and award-winning critic. We must guard against "institutionalizing" children's literature, he says. He goes on to state his belief that in literary creativity today, "the most important literature is that written for children." (Loughborough International Seminar on Children's Literature, Stirling, Scotland, August 14, 1979)

Since children's books are seen as significant not only in the experience of children but also in their inherent aesthetic qualities, it is worthwhile to try to discern current trends in subject and treatment. One trend is indicated by the books which received both the Newbery and the Caldecott 1980 awards (A Gathering of Days, by Joan Blos; Ox-Cart Man, by Donald Hall, illus. by Barbara Cooney): the celebration of traditional America. While both works exude a New England flavor, their appeal is affirmative of general cultural values as well as regional nostalgia. Such a trend, of course, is not new. Its roots go back to The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Little Women. Nor has this theme ever

been fully neglected, as the continuing popularity of the Little House books and tremendous success of the derivative television series prove. In recent years, however, the flood of contemporary realism and sophisticated fantasy assumed prominence. New realistic books and works of fantasy will be published, of course, but there is an indication that more historical fiction will be produced than in the recent past. This reflects the conservative mood of the country. It also is practical in its presentation of traditional national values at a time when widely disparate groups need to be assimilated, such as the refugees from Southeast Asia and the Caribbean.

Along with this trend will be a continuing presentation of ethnic materials. Such cultural infusion, whether through folklore or fiction, has consistently enriched children's literature. The picture book format, in particular, has been effectively employed to portray individual folktales in both visual and text form. During the 1970's, a succession of Caldecott books exemplified this: among them, tales from Africa-the Caribbean (A Story--A Story, Gail Haley), Armenia (One Fine Day, Nonny Hogrogian), Japan (The Funny Little Woman, Arlene Mosel/ Blair Lent), Britain (Duffy and the Devil, Harve and Margot Zemach), native America (Arrow to the Sun, Gerald McDermott), West Africa (Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears, Verna Aardema/ Leo and Diane Dillon), Italy (Strega Nona, Tomie de Paola), and Jewish East Europe (The Golem, Beverly Brodsky McDermott).

The selection of Isaac Bashevis Singer for the Nobel Prize in Literature is a culmination of the haven for distinctive cultural heritage which children's literature has provided. A prediction which can be tendered is that as the Hispanic minority grows in number and political voice, more children's books reflecting the background and customs of these Americans will be published.

The increasing number of instances of censorship indicates a trend toward fewer strident examples of street language and more emphasis on the stylistic grace of language. An area which may thereby be enhanced is poetry, which has long needed more attention by self-assured teachers and librarians. The basic element of a poem is rhythm, an element to which almost all children respond. Research by Ann Terry, published in 1974 (Children's Poetry Preferences: A National Survey of the Upper Elementary Grades) showed that children prefer rhyme as basic sound pattern. Advertising jingle writers have long exploited this preference (which carries into adulthood), and from their ranks came children's favorite versifier: Theodor Geisel, Dr. Seuss, the 1980 Wilder Awardee. An obstacle to children's appreciation of the poetry written for them has been unawareness on the part of teachers and librarians of this body of work. They have rarely been introduced in college classes to Dorothy Aldis or Harry Behn, much less to contemporary authors like Eve Merriam and John Ciardi, who have written children's poetry as well as other work.

The recently instituted NCTE Poetry for Children Award -- so far presented to David McCord, Aileen Fisher, Karla Kuskin, and Myra Cohn Livingston -- gives recognition to current poets. Knowledge of these people and their poems should change the situation reported in 1973 by Chow Loy Tom, where 90% of the poetry read to students in the classes researched was over fifty years old, and "Paul Revere's Ride," published in 1861, was the poem most frequently read to students by teachers ("Paul Revere Rides Ahead: Poems Teachers Read to Pupils in the Middle Grades," Library Quarterly, January 1973).

A final trend to be commented upon here is the progressing rapprochement between the mass media and children's books. Disney built a financial empire on children's stories, though often he was accused of distortion by critics (see, for example, "Walt Disney Accused," an interview with Frances Clarke Sayers, Horn Book, December 1965). Ground for criticism remains, in the ubiquitous merchandising of "Walt Disney's Bambi," "Walt Disney's Winnie the Pooh," "Walt Disney's Pinocchio," etc. with little or no acknowledgement to Felix Salten, A. A. Milne, or Carlo Collodi (Lorenzini). Recent producers who have drawn from the rich store of children's books have sought to be faithful to the original in their translation from book to film, whether in animation (Charlotte's Web, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe) or live action (The Little Prince, Where the Lilies Bloom). An early translation-adaptation

movie of a children's fantasy book has provided TV with its top rerun: The Wizard of Oz. Television has given impetus to the formation of a forceful consumer-parent group, Action for Children's Television (ACT). Increasingly networks have responded to ACT's criticism, to the benefit of young viewers. Afterschool programs, while still infrequent, draw good ratings from educators and concerned parents (see two-part report by Claire Safran in TV Guide, August 9/16, 1980). Media translations of children's books have become increasingly available to schools and libraries in audio-visual format; for example, the picture book sound-filmstrips pioneered by Weston Woods and the Newbery adaptations by Miller-Brody. Unlike the borrowing of books, however, there has not been much opportunity for young people to view visuals at home because of the need for projection equipment. The prediction is now being made that development of videodiscs will bring viewer-controlled programming into the home as correlative to network fare. Production of discs will demand a large bank of material, to which children's literature can supply much. The last two decades of the 1900's may see open access for youngsters to discs as well as books, giving them opportunity for comparative reading/viewing at home and at school.

Sheila Egoff of the University of British Columbia presented the 1979 Arbuthnot Lecture in children's literature ("Beyond the Garden Wall: Some Observations on Current Trends in Children's Literature," Top of the News, Spring 1979).

She noted two trends she did not find in contemporary children's books as compared with those of the past: much light humor, or many animal-child heroes. Perhaps next year or soon thereafter such trends, and others also not now discernible, will appear. Along with the increase in number of books produced for children in the past few decades, the kaleidoscopic growth and change of subjects and modes attests to the vitality of the field of children's literature.

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